



Stage craft

Cyrus is back doing analogue once again, and **Ed Selley** can't help but be impressed by this multi-input phono stage

Not so long ago, Cyrus looked like it was on the cusp of closing the 'analogue window' of its products altogether. With DACs and streamers doing a fine job doubling as preamps and a healthy collection of power amps, it seemed it had lost interest in analogue connections. But the boom in vinyl has caused the Huntingdon-based company to revisit its roots and look at making a vinyl preamp once again some years after its last phono stage ceased production, and this one is no half measure.

Let's start with some headline specifications to set the scene. There

are four inputs, each of which can be configured for either moving-magnet or moving-coil operation. If you choose the latter you also have the option of setting the gain, capacitance and impedance to best suit the cartridge you have connected. Best of all you can change the settings using the remote control during playback from the comfort of your listening position.

If all of this seems a little excessive, the reasoning behind the Phono Signature is admirably straightforward. Technical director Peter Bartlett wanted the ability to change capacitance and impedance 'on the

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cyrus Phono Signature
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
MM & MC phono stage
WEIGHT
4.1kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
215 x 73 x 360mm
FEATURES
• Four phono inputs
• Each input configurable for MM and MC loading
• RCA and XLR outputs
DISTRIBUTOR
Cyrus Audio
TELEPHONE
01480 410900
WEBSITE
cyrusaudio.com

fly' as the loading instructions for many cartridges are suggestions rather than hard and fast rules and best performance can vary from record to record. Once the Phono Signature had been designed to incorporate this functionality and the attendant display fitted to make use of the feature, it made little difference to the final cost to manufacture it to handle four cartridges.

Internally, it is no less sophisticated. To allow for remote switching, mechanical relays are used to switch between the settings. These offer lower distortion than manual switches. These are then combined with a design that combines immense amounts of gain with extremely low noise. The Phono Signature is able to produce a maximum output voltage of 9V RMS combined with signal-to-noise ratios of 87dBa for MM and 79dBa for MC. The long and the short of it is that it should be able to generate a suitable output level for almost any cartridge and not make unwanted noise while it does so.

This is all encased in the standard Cyrus half-width casework and from

the front, unless you read the display, it would be easy to mistake the Phono Signature for any other member of the Cyrus range. The settings are menu driven and while the experience isn't the most cohesive, it is logical and easy to do. The display shows the input selected and the

The Phono Signature has the classic Cyrus look we've come to know and love

various settings as they have been configured. Highlight one, select it with the rotary control and choose the setting you want. The display also includes a small but legible level indicator, which is useful for setting the required gain.

The rear panel is fairly busy with the four inputs arranged in a row a little too closely together to make for easy connection. There's the option of RCA and XLR outputs and there are also Cyrus-specific connections in the form of MC-BUS ports and an input for a PSX-R2 power supply.

This latter connection is one the company recommends you take advantage of. You can use it as a standalone device, but Cyrus stresses the Phono Signature was designed with the PSX-R2 (£695) in mind and so one is also supplied for review.

Sound is felt as much as heard without any trace of bloat or bloom

Adding a PSX-R2 is not an issue in space terms – the two units will sit side by side on a conventional hi-fi rack – but it does mean that you will need two mains leads as it augments rather than replaces the power supply in the Signature. In the course of the review, the phono stage is used both with and without the PSX-R2 in place.

The supplied iR14 remote allows full access to the menu features, but there are a great many buttons that don't do anything specific to the Signature. The good news is that the remote can be set up to control two other non-Cyrus devices for more flexibility and even without any programming, the volume commands

prove functional on a Naim Supernait 2 amp. The iR14, isn't the most beautiful device ever, but it is well built, easy to use and has some useful extra features.

Even used on its own, the Cyrus has some notable attributes. The first is that it is a supremely quiet phono stage and is completely silent at idle. Connected to an Avid Ingenium Twin with Nagaoka MP-150 moving-magnet cartridge (HFC 375) on one side and Audio-Technica AT33PTG/II moving-coil cartridge (HFC 402) on the other, the Phono Signature is almost supernaturally quiet. If your turntable is free of noise, you can rest assured that it won't add any of its own and regardless of any gain setting, the Cyrus remains ultra quiet.

Sound quality

With no extraneous noise in the signal you can easily hear what the Cyrus is up to and the news is equally good. This is not a phono stage you buy to romanticise vinyl. It will display no more warmth or bloom than is naturally on the record itself. The trade off to this is that it is at times startlingly vivid. With the Nagaoka MP-150 cartridge playing Nils Frahm's *Spaces* album, it is in its element. The absence of noise allows the rustling and murmur of the audience to be easily discerned and the all-important piano is rendered with incredible vividness and energy. The scale of the presentation is fantastic. The gain levels mean its scale is effortlessly reproduced without the amplification having to break into a sweat.

Spend a little more time with the Cyrus and it becomes clear that this is a wonderfully natural and involving phono stage. Fink's *Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet* is exceptionally real. Greenall's vocals are filled with

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

Peter Bartlett

Technical consultant, Cyrus



ES: It has been some years since Cyrus has produced a phono stage. What prompted the decision to produce the Phono Signature?

PB: The RoHS directive unfortunately ended the Phono X and at that time we wanted to focus on developing our streaming platform and then the Lyric all-in-one system, therefore it has taken more time than we would ideally have wanted to get back onto a new phono stage. In the meantime, several of our team have purchased new turntables and became very excited by vinyl, just like our customers.

Was the decision to make the Phono Signature adjustable via remote taken at the outset of development or did it evolve by degrees?

The initial 'blue sky' staff meeting that always precedes our Functional Requirement Specification (FRS) document listed this as a must-have feature. We all have precious LPs, some bought as teenagers, that sound frustratingly coloured; the ability to tweak the loading – and thereby the sonic balance – is now an essential feature that we could not now live without. It's this type of collective planning that makes working in a privately owned, enthusiast company so exciting.

The Phono Signature has XLR outputs – is the circuit balanced throughout or only at this point?

It's designed with a correctly balanced output stage. This is included for those who want to use longer cables to a preamp. One could argue that balanced cables would potentially reduce any issues between chassis or interference induced in a poorly isolated phono lead. However, we fully expect most owners to use quality phono cables.

The Phono Signature carries out a single function rather than multiple roles – is this an indicator of future Cyrus product development?

Future Cyrus models will become even more focused on performance to satisfy the demands of our audiophile customers.



The supplied iR14 remote allows settings to be adjusted on the fly

texture and energy and are layered on top of the supporting instruments in such a way as to be part of the piece without ever being lost in it. The extended version of *Sort Of Revolution* is also underpinned by phenomenal bass. At various points, a huge hand drum is struck and the sound is felt as much as heard and the Phono Signature handles it without any trace of bloat or bloom.

It also has energy and a sense of fun that shines through. Listen to the wonderful *Rose Rouge* by St Germain and the Cyrus simply grooves. Every beat and break is relayed with the

The absence of noise allows the murmur of the audience to be discerned

speed and precision of an atomic clock and within seconds you are completely immersed in the music.

The more genres of music you throw at it, the more skilful it becomes. You can spend an evening kicking off with the beautifully intimate and melancholy *Pink Moon* by Nick Drake, move on to the powerful blues of the Mark Lanegan Band and finish with Underworld's *Dubnobasswithmyheadman* and the Cyrus will handle every note with the discretion of a well-trained personal assistant. This is not a device that will drastically alter the characteristics of your analogue source, but will instead show you exactly what your turntable is capable of without putting itself into the mix.

The Signature Phono is also a seriously accomplished moving-magnet phono stage. It uses fixed settings to follow the RIAA curve and even without any tweekery at work, the fundamental qualities shine through. It simply gets out of the way

and allows the virtues of the cartridge to shine through.

The ability to adjust cartridge settings in real time is interesting, but with the Audio-Technica the results are subtle. The very idea that you can make the adjustments at all while sat in your listening position rather than peering at dip switches is wonderful and although it helps with setup enormously, you will be keen to stop tweaking and get listening. Adding the PSX-R2 is a very worthwhile undertaking. The effect on the performance is subtle but effective. The space and separation improves further and the already superb tonality takes another step forward. If you can budget for it, the benefits are certainly worthwhile.

Conclusion

Even if you can't add in the PSX-R2, this is a superb offering and a welcome arrival to the ranks of high-end phono stages – and indeed judged by the prices of many rivals it is something of a bargain. This is a device that genuinely delivers on the promise of vinyl as a high-resolution format and the fact that it does so while offering class-leading functionality and flexibility makes it very special indeed ●



HOW IT COMPARES

Avid's Pulsus, Whest's PS.30R and Roksan's RPP are all comparative with the Cyrus and PSX-R2, and the Roksan in particular can come close to matching its exceptionally quiet performance. What none of these phono stages can do is offer the adjustment flexibility of the Phono Signature. All of them offer the option to adjust the settings for the cartridge you are using, but only the Cyrus can do this via remote during playback. More pressingly, the ability of the Cyrus to handle multiple carts is hard to replicate. There is nothing that is able to match the Phono Signature's ability to handle up to four cartridges at once.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Exceptionally flexible; ease of use; performance with multiple carts

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Display; won't flatter poor recordings

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A remarkable phono stage with tremendous flexibility and exceptional sound

FEATURES



OVERALL

